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January 11, 2006

News

## It's all about the Benjamins

by Dee Cook



A post on [Unfiction](#) mentioned a new trailhead for [Who Is Benjamin Stove](#). Investigation of the site indicates that Tucker Darby, a 29 year old collections agent living in Tampa, needs your help. Over the holidays he found a mysterious painting of a crop circle, dated 1913, which has exhibited an almost supernatural hold over him. He's been trying to identify the artist and the story behind it ever since.

A note inside the [painting](#) indicated that the event depicted was real. He's asking for help finding the man who originally owned the painting, Benjamin Stove, and figuring out what the painting means.

What makes this especially interesting is the fact that blog ads were bought for several high-dollar sites to advertise [Who is Benjamin Stove](#). Meta information indicates that this site may be the rabbithole into the next big professional game.

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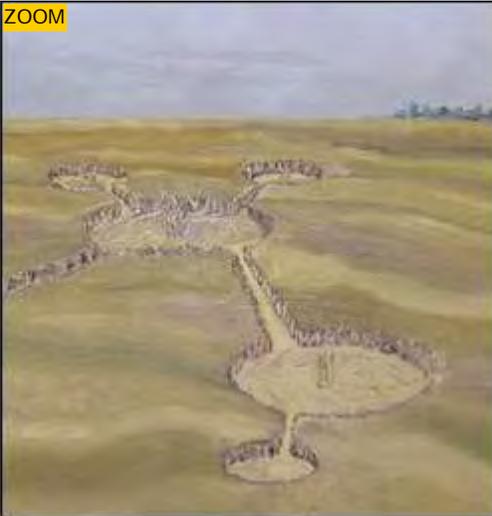




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ZOOM



PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

### The plot so far

In January, on a visit to his parents in Newton, Ia., Tampa collections agent Tucker Darby rediscovers an old painting of crop circles he'd purchased at an estate sale as a boy. Closer examination reveals a signature on the painting — V. Stove — and two letters hidden in the back. When he asks his mother about V. Stove, she tells him the Stoves were an eccentric farm family from Newton and that the last member, Benjamin Stove, abandoned the farm years before. Intrigued by the mystery, Tucker decides to find Benjamin Stove and turns to the Internet community for help.

## Who is Benjamin Stove?

Mystery tangles Newton farmer in Web plot

By MARY CHALLENGER  
REGISTER STAFF WRITER

February 9, 2006

Every good mystery has its red herrings.

At [www.whoisbenjaminstove.com](http://www.whoisbenjaminstove.com), something fishy is going on and all trails seem to lead to . . . Newton?

Newton is the scene of the Web site's tale of an eccentric farmer named Benjamin Stove who abandoned his Newton farm in 1988, leaving behind an eerie painting.

The Web site is purportedly authored by a guy named Tucker Darby, a Newton native who works as a collections agent near Tampa, Fla.

On the site, Darby blogs about how he paid \$8 for the painting, a composition of crop circles, at an estate sale as a kid and dug it out of storage on a trip home.

When he spotted a signature on the painting, he asked his mother about it. She told him about the eccentric Stove family and their son Benjamin, a hermit who one day just up and vanished.

Darby decides to track down Benjamin Stove and, if possible, buy him a beer - one Newton underachiever to another. He creates a Web site with the hope the online community will aid him in his search.

It's a compelling story.

There's just one problem.

At the Newton Police Department, they've never

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### The clues

- A painting of crop circles that Tucker Darby purchased from the Stove estate years before
- A signature on the painting that says, "V. Stove 1913"
- Two notes that fall out of the back of the painting:
  - 1) one A recipe card for a dish called "Fiejoada"
  - 2) A letter signed Dr. Martinez
- A Web page tribute to "Dr. Ferdinand Martinez, Tio do Misterio" and including mention of "circulo da colheita," or crop circles.
- Coded correspondence between Benjamin Stove and Dr. Martinez, pointing to a book in a public library in

heard of Benjamin Stove. Nor does the name Tucker Darby ring any bells at Newton Senior High School.

One person in Newton who has heard of both Stove and Darby is Holly Youngquist, a librarian at the Newton Public Library.

"We've had at least one person come in asking about the Web site and trying to figure out if they're real people," she said. "They couldn't find the people it (the Web site) claimed were from Newton."

There's no Tucker Darby listed in Tampa, either - although a search did turn up a T. Darby in Roswell, N.M.

Maybe the question isn't "Who is Benjamin Stove" but "What is the Benjamin Stove Web site?"

A search to find out who the site is registered to leads to Brian Clark, chief executive officer of GMD Studios in Winter Park, Fla.

GMD Studios is an "experimental new media developer" whose work includes creating alternate reality games - or "puzzles" as many prefer to label them.

Clark, who was born in Iowa and spent the first nine months of his life here, wouldn't confirm that "whoisbenjaminstove" is the rabbit hole to a new fantasy aimed at Internet mystery solvers.

"Even this interview will draw some raised eyebrows from people in the online gaming community," he said. "They talk about what we do as 'puppetmasters.' They want the puppetmaster to stay behind the curtain. They don't want their feeling of reality to get busted."

If "whoisbenjaminstove" does turn out to be an alternate reality game, Newton could be in for more than just some strange phone calls.

In an effort to further blur the line between fantasy and reality, many of the games feature so-called "real world" events. An alternate reality game called "Art of the Heist," for instance, included a car "theft" in New York City, while "Last Call Poker" hosted actual poker games in graveyards across the United States.

Clark wouldn't comment on whether anything similar is in store for Newton. Nor would he comment on whether "Benjamin Stove" — if it is an alternate reality game — is corporate-sponsored as many of its predecessors have

Seattle.

- A letter found in the library book that included latitude and longitude coordinates as well as references to H. Bingham, Incan warriors, European knights and samurai.

### Join the search

**1)** Go to [whoisbenjaminstove.com](http://whoisbenjaminstove.com) and read all of Tucker Darby's blogs, beginning with Jan. 5. Click on all the links because some contain clues.

**2)** Then, click on forums and read all the recent postings to see where the mystery is at now (and possibly get more clues).

**3)** When you're up to speed, register in the forum and you're ready to go.



Hill

### What is alternate-reality gaming?

Alternate-reality gaming is, according to CNET, "an obsession-inspiring genre that blends real-life treasure hunting, interactive storytelling, video games and online community."

The games, called ARGs, involve a complicated series of puzzles that are solved by hunting down clues. These clues can be obtained anywhere from coded Web sites to newspaper advertisements to mysterious phone calls from game characters.

One of the first wide-scale ARGs was a game created by a team of Microsoft writers, artists and Web designers in 2001 to promote the Steven Spielberg movie "A.I.: Artificial Intelligence."

That game, which came to be called "The Beast" because the first draft included 666 graphic elements, laid out the rules for future ARGs:

- The story should be delivered in pieces

been. "Art of the Heist," for instance, which Clark worked on, was paid for by Audi. He also has done similar work for Sharp.

Now along comes "Benjamin Stove," a puzzle set in Newton.

If there's a Maytag connection, Clark's not commenting on that, either.

\* \* \*

### AMES MOM HELPS RESCUE EARTH

One Sunday afternoon in fall 2004, a pay telephone rang in downtown Ames. Kirsten Hill was waiting with her husband, Tony, to answer it.

The Ames mother had learned the location of the telephone from GPS coordinates posted on the Internet.

Now she was trying to do her part to unlock the latest episode in a "War of the Worlds"-type radio serial and, in the process, save 26th-century Earth from alien invasion.

Hill wasn't alone in her efforts. More than a million Internet users both in and outside the United States joined her in the attempt to solve the cryptic fantasy puzzle behind a Web site called "I Love Bees."

Although Hill's first foray into the world of alternate reality gaming (ARGs for short) only lasted about a month before the mystery was solved, the 28-year-old was hooked.

"I really like the fact that there's a little bit of an interactive story element," she said.

After "I Love Bees," Hill, who works part time with her church's college ministry, jumped into a British ARG called "Perplex City." The plot of "Perplex City" revolves around a stolen cube from another world that somehow ends up on Earth.

The cube carries a reward of about \$180,000 if returned to its rightful owner.

Like all ARGs, "Perplex City" deliberately blurs the line between fantasy and reality. There really is a hidden cube and a reward for finding it.

Not that Hill expects to be collecting anytime soon.

"I'm imaging the cube is going to be hiding in

so players would have to assemble the pieces.

- The game should require a vast community of players to work together to solve puzzles rather than fight over the pieces.
- Nobody should know who the creators or puppetmasters are behind the game.
- The story should enter the world through many different avenues, including Web sites, e-mails, phone calls, newspaper ads, cryptic billboards and fragments of sound.
- The story should blur the line between the real world and the imaginary. What if you saw a mystery movie then the lead character called you at home with a clue? That was the premise.
- The golden rule: The game should never admit it was a game. It should act as if it were real and be populated by characters about whom the players/audience/participants could care.

Unlike online role-playing games such as "Everquest," ARGs are generally free. There's nothing to download or buy (although "Perplex City" does have corresponding card decks, they are not required to play the game).

Most of the games are corporate-sponsored and tie in to a product or movie, making them, in the words of CNET, "one of the most powerful guerrilla marketing mechanisms ever invented."

#### **ZOOM** how do you get started?

Go to **argn.com** for a list of currently running ARGs and links to forums. Smaller grassroots games can be found at **unifiction.com**.

England somewhere so there's no way I'm going to find it," Hill said. "I'm in it for the story."

She also enjoys the challenge of trying to solve the puzzles.

Usually she's "really bad" at piecing together the clues presented in the games, Hill said, but the other night she finally has some success.

The solution depended on getting access to an "employee-only" Web site that one of the "Perplex City" characters had mentioned on his blog.

"There was a whole bunch of little sound clips," Hill explained. "You had to rearrange them to spell out a question. But first you had to figure out how to download the clips. It was sort of like a riddle. The way to get into the Web site was the answer to the riddle."

Hill said her husband, a graduate student at Iowa State University, helped her work on a solution. They shared what they learned with other "Perplex City" devotees who were also working on the puzzle.

A man in England finally assembled the riddle, about musical modes:

"When I am between Lydian and Aeolian, what is my name?"

The answer that unlocked the Web site: Mixolydian.

"That was kind of fun," Hill said. "I hadn't done that before."

Hill said she's also following "Who Is Benjamin Stove" because of the Iowa connection. Although she finds the pace at which the story is unfolding to be a little slow right now, she's curious about the outcome.

"Maybe they'll have some real world event or puzzle in Iowa," she said hopefully. "I'm definitely going to want to see where it ends."

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# VEIVÄTKÖ MUUKALAISET HERRA STOVEN?

Teksti Matti Järvi Kuvat whoisbenjaminstove.com



Oliko Iowassa peltoympyröitä vuonna 1913? Nykypäivän Loch Ness syvenee.

**Vuonna 1988 iowalainen maanviljelijä Benjamin Stove katoaa tilaltaan. Vuonna 2006 floridalainen Tucker Darby aloittaa kadonneen viljelijän etsinnän. Lopulta sadat ihmiset jakavat vinkkejään siitä, mitä Stovelle olisi tapahtunut. Samalla faktan ja fiktion raja alkaa hämärtyä.**



Benjamin Stove ennen viidenkymppin villitystä.

Viime jouluna vieraillessaan kotikonnuillaan Iowassa **Tucker Darby** alkoi penkoa laatikoita, joihin hänen lapsuutensa tavaroita oli säilötty. Näistä laatikoista hän löysi peltoympyröitä esittävän maalauksen, joka oli ollut hänen huoneensa seinällä.

Hän päätti ottaa taulun mukaan kotiinsa muistoksi ja lahjaksi tyttöystävälleen. Lentokentällä tullimiehet kuitenkin pysäyttivät hänet ja vaativat, että taulu olisi irroitettava kehyksistään läpivalaisua varten. Tässä yhteydessä kehyksen sisältä putosi pari lappusta, joista toinen oli kirje muuan tohtori Martinez:lta, joka oli vienyt maalauksen kuvattavaksi. Kirjeessä hän harmittelee, ettei alkuperäisestä tapahtumasta ole jäljellä muita kuvia. Lisäksi kehyksen irrotuksen myötä maalauksen signeeraus pääsi esiin: V.Stove 1913.

#### **KAHJON FARMARIN METSÄSTYS**

Oliko peltoympyröistä puhetta siis jo vuonna 1913? Ja kuka oli V.Stove? Darby lähti selvittämään kysymyksiä soittamalla kotiinsa. Hänen äitinsä mainitsi, että heidän kotikaupungissaan asui ennen "hivenen seonnut" maanviljelijä nimeltä Benjamin Stove, jolle maalaus on ilmeisesti kuulunut. Maalarina on todennäköisesti toiminut hänen mummonsä Vera Stove.

Benjamin Stove katosi kuitenkin tilaltaan vuonna 1988 vieden salaisuuden mukanaan. Darby päätti ratkaista arvoituksen kääntymällä internetin käyttäjien puoleen. Hän avasi tammi-

kuussa sivuston [www.whoisbenjaminstove.com](http://www.whoisbenjaminstove.com), jonne on kirjautunut jo yli seitsemänsataa mysteerien ystävää.

#### **SUURI, SYKKIVÄ AIVO**

Sähköpostihaastattelussa Tucker Darby kertoo, että hän aloitti internetiin levittäytymisensä asettamalla mainoksia joihinkin suosittuihin blogisivustoihin. Rahaa tähän tarkoitukseen hän sai nimettömältä lahjoittajalta ja myymällä vanhan Volkswagen Bus:nsa.

Leikkimielisesti hän tarjosi parhaiden vihjeiden antajille joitakin lapsuutensa "korvaamattomia perintökalleuksia", eli arvotonta roskaa, kuten hän itse sanoo. Darby toteaa, että hänen fooruminsa käyttäjät ovat olleet hänelle korvaamaton apu: – Millä tapaa he eivät olisi olleet avuksi?, hän painottaa. Darby kertoo, että hän ei itse ole kovin kummoinen arvoitusten ratkaisija, mutta internet on vääpäällä lahjakkaita koodinmurtajia.

– Tuskin olisin voinut myöskään lentää Seattleen ja löytää kirjastosta erään Stoven muistiinpanoista, kuten eräs käyttäjä teki, hän kuvaa.

Darby kuvaa foorumiaan "suureksi, sykkiväksi aivoksi", joka on alkanut muistuttaa elävää, hengittävää olennoa. Foorumeilla mysteeri on edistynyt myös siihen pisteeseen, että Darby on löytänyt tohtori Martinezin sisarentyttären, Anita Martinezin, joka on pystynyt lähettämään hänelle edesmenneen enonsa kirjeenvaihtoa Stoven kanssa.

Sisarentyttareltä löytyi myös joitakin kuvia etsitystä Benjamin Stovesta. Samalla sekä Darbyn, että foorumin käyttäjät ovat löytäneet Benjamin Stoven kryptisiä kirjoituksia ympäri Pohjois-Amerikkaa. Kirjeistä ilmenee, et-

tä Stove oli hyvin, miltei sairaalloisen kiinnostunut paranormaaleista ilmiöistä. Välimatka Stoven lopulliseen kohtaloon on lyhentynyt merkittävästi.

#### **MAINOSKIKKA?**

Tucker Darbyn tutkimus on herättänyt myös skeptikkojen huomion. Epäilijöiden ryhmä väittää, että kyseessä on ARG (alternative reality game), eli vaihtoehtotodellisuuspelejä, jonka tapahtumilla ei ole todellista vastinetta.

Kärkkäimmät kriitikot ovat yhdistäneet sivuston myös tänä vuonna julkaistavaksi ennakoituun elokuvaan *The Visiting*, jonka roolijaossa ovat myös nimet Ben ja Tucker. Samalla myös Tucker Darbyn todellinen henkilöllisyys on kyseenalaistettu pelkän Blair Witch -tyylisen mainoskikan asteelle. Osa foorumin käyttäjistä on myös tiedostanut tämän, mutta päättänyt olla pilaamatta iloa, vaan pikemminkin pelannut mukana ja pyrkinyt ratkaisemaan eteen tulevia kysymyksiä kuin Da Vinci -koodissa konsanaan.

Darby ei ole varma, mikä on etsintöjen seuraava askel. Hän mainitsee odottavansa seuraavaa pakettia Anita Martinezilta, joka pitäisi sisällään Benjaminin ja tämän oppi-isänsä kirjeenvaihtoa. Lisäksi hän on saanut johtolankoja, joiden mukaan Stoven muistiinpanoja saattaisi löytyä Detroitin kaupunginkirjastosta, jonne luultavasti joku foorumin käyttäjistä ehti.

Ennen lehden painoon menoa Anita paketti ehti saapua, ja se pitää sisällään hämmäntävillä merkeillä varustetun Stoven kirjeen. Seuraavaksi Darby siis odottaakin pätevien merkitutkijoiden apua.

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## Is it real or is it a game?

By Christa Marshall

Jackie Kerr ventured into a Washington cemetery last fall searching for a game of poker where tombstones were used instead of cards.

Kerr, 26, of Baltimore, made the hundred-mile trip at the request of billionaire Lucky Brown. Kerr didn't know Brown personally, but she had read a plea from him on a Web site where he claimed playing the game would provide clues that might help a niece of his who had received death threats about an antique gun she owned.

Strangely, Kerr had been getting phone calls about the gun, too. "They were really creepy messages on my answering machine."

But Brown, his niece and her stalkers weren't really a threat.

They were fictional characters on "Last Call Poker," a Web site game that asks players not only to solve an online mystery but also to participate in it through phone calls, online messages and wacky adventures.

The blend of online game and real-life mystery in "Last Call Poker" is typical in alternate reality gaming, or ARG, a fad that started five years ago by companies that were looking for a way to market new software and movies.

The games have become so popular that businesses like General Motors have started using them as educational tools, taking game players along for the recreational ride.

"It's like a mystery novel, except [in ARG] the mystery novel talks back," said Kerr, a biologist. "Imagine watching a movie and walking directly into the screen."

For example, Kerr discovered that the main purpose of the cemetery poker game was to draw attention to tombstone dates, which contained a coded message that introduced another character into the game.

➔ [CLICK THIS TEXT](#) for high-resolution images and text-only story



A painting of circles in a corn field, which are in the shape of the ethanol molecule. The painting is the key clue in "Who is Benjamin Stove?" the latest alternate reality game. General Motors sponsored the game to promote ethanol as part of its "Live Green Go Yellow" campaign. (Courtesy of WhoisBenjaminStove.com)



Two people play cemetery poker in Austin, Texas. Each tombstone represents a card. The last number in the year of death is the rank; the shape of the tombstone represents the suit (rounded graves are hearts, pointy ones are spades, etc.). Players win by finding two "cards" with the highest number of points. They must touch the card and each other for the game to count. (Courtesy of Dee Cook)

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Alternate reality games began growing in popularity in 2001, when Microsoft created an ARG called "The Beast" to promote the film "Artificial Intelligence: A.I."

"The growth has been phenomenal," said David Szulborski, who creates many alternate reality games. "It started with a small group of Internet fans. Now I see middle-aged housewives trying it."

Games typically start with a cryptic announcement on a general alternate reality gaming Web site. The announcement leads players to another Web site, the game "headquarters," where they play for free. There, they read postings from fictional characters that are so authentic they often have photographs--supplied by the game creators--and detailed personal lives.

The characters are always trying to solve a mystery, which players participate in by communicating with each other through Internet names like "Scarpegrosse," Kerr's name on "Last Call Poker." They voluntarily supply their phone numbers to the game creators, readying themselves for spontaneous clue-seeking missions, like graveyard poker.

"You can be going through your daily routine and suddenly get a call asking you to drop everything and drive somewhere," said Chris Love, a Albuquerque, N.M., player of "Who is Benjamin Stove?" a recent ARG that asks players to solve a mystery involving a painting of circles in a corn field. "What's cooler than that?"

But the appeal extends beyond a mere adrenaline rush.

Games often incorporate detailed information on a range of subjects, attracting history buffs and the simply curious. For example, "Who is Benjamin Stove?" provided clues that also helped players learn about Mayan civilization.

Social networking is also a big draw for players who typically spend months collaborating on a game.

"We go to each other's weddings," Kerr said. "It's just like any other social activity, except we attend scavenger hunts rather than cocktail parties."

The role-playing has its downside though.

Kerr says the games are time-consuming, requiring players to juggle leisure and family life. It also breeds paranoia, because players must determine if strangers calling or e-mailing them are truly who they claim to be.

"When new people emerge in our lives, our instinct is to ask, 'Are they real, or are they providing information for the game?'" Kerr said. "Some people get too wrapped up in that."

The level of dedication players have for ARG games has grabbed the attention of corporations, which have traditionally used the games to promote a single product, but they now are beginning to use them for



"Last Call Poker" players pose in a cemetery in Austin, Texas, after playing tombstone poker. (Courtesy of Dee Cook)

broader marketing campaigns.

For example, General Motors sponsored "Who is Benjamin Stove?" to raise ethanol awareness.

The names of General Motor products did not appear in the game, but game creator Szulborski pointed out that the key clue--a painting of circles in a corn field--is in the shape of an ethanol molecule. Many of the game's mythological references also involve corn, the main ingredient in ethanol.

Szulborski said that similar educational campaigns are in the planning stage at companies like Hewlett-Packard.

The companies may ultimately benefit from the games--General Motors, for example, sells cars that run on ethanol--but Szulborski said companies never used to devote time to something that didn't involve an immediate profit.

"We've never used these games for this kind of information before," Szulborski said. "I'm working on an upcoming ARG that raises public awareness about a potential avian flu pandemic."

To most players, the process of the game matters more than the purpose. Part of the thrill is perusing clues to figure out who the game sponsor is, and what it's trying to achieve. Kerr said that "Who is Benjamin Stove?" players didn't know General Motors' exact involvement until the end, deepening the mystery.

"In the end, we're puzzle solvers who like a challenge," said Kerr, who discovered that "Last Call Poker" was a video game promotion. "If it's for a good cause, all the better."

E-mail: cm2390@columbia.edu

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## Alternate Reality Gaming Network: Who Is Benjamin Stove? Wrap Up & PM Chat

by Carie Ward

April 11, 2006



The question of "[Who Is Benjamin Stove?](#)" has finally been answered after four months of intense speculation. Depending on who you ask, Ben Stove is: a tinfoil hat nut job; a teacher; a research; a shaman; an alien; hot-headed; a great guy; a man of vision; enigmatic; a scientist; a friend. In other words, just your average internet personality.

Players were first introduced to the mystery of Ben Stove in the form of [a painting of a crop circle](#). From there, they found Ben Stove's mentor, [Dr. Martinez](#), and obtained copies of [letters written from Ben to Dr. Martinez](#) over the years. The letters were filled with secret codes that led to [libraries](#) all over the [country](#) at the same time as they caught the eye of some mysterious [Men In Black](#). Eventually, [Ben Stove himself](#) was found, along with [his website](#) filled with research into crop circles. His research showed players that the crop circles were a warning to the people of earth about the dangers of fossil fuels and that using alternatives, such as ethanol based products, were the way to save humanity.

Over the course of the game, the players learned to decipher the secrets of crop circles, find hidden messages in personal correspondence and went on mini-missions all over the country looking for the next piece of a trail laid out by Ben over many years. Those lucky enough to solve a bit of the puzzle were often rewarded with some [Random Heirloom Crap](#) - probably the strangest items of swag ever given out during a game. Only ARG players would get excited about [old snorkels](#), [Christmas candles](#), [unicorn statues](#), [baseball gloves](#) and the [certificates of authenticity](#) that went along with them. The "grand prize" of [one tinfoil hatted coconut](#) is being

awarded to the most valuable player as determined by the rest of the players.

Who Is Benjamin Stove? broke new ground in the alternate reality gaming genre by keeping the sponsor of the game a secret until the final weeks of the campaign. Although many players speculated over who was behind it, very few hit upon the fact that WIBS was tied into [General Motors "Live Green, Go Yellow"](#) campaign until it was announced by the characters. At the end of the game, Ben Stove issued a [manifesto to the world](#) calling on everyone to forego fossil fuel and instead switch to renewable ethanol based fuel. One way to do this is to switch to flex-fuel vehicles made by GM. [General Motors later responded](#) to Ben Stove and his esteemed colleagues thanking them for their interest and inviting them to learn more about their E85 vehicles at their website. This was a bold step by the PuppetMasters, to hope that players would identify with a product when they had so long been without a clue as to what it was. It will be interesting to see if this structure is deemed a success and if any other games will follow suit in the future.

A post game chat with the Puppetmasters of Who Is Benjamin Stove? has been scheduled for "Stoveday" - Thursday, April 13th at 9pm EDT (6pm PDT). It will be a moderated IRC chat held on [irc.chat-solutions.org](http://irc.chat-solutions.org) in [#benjaminstove](#). For help connecting to the chat, or to submit a question if you are unable to attend, please visit the [thread at Unfiction](#). ARGN and the WIBS PuppetMasters hope to see you there.

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PR Newswire

# GM Challenges Online Gamers: 'Who Is Benjamin Stove?'

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Alternate Reality Game Promotes Renewable Fuel Options Such as E85 Ethanol DETROIT, April 11 /PRNewswire/ -- Aliens, time travelers and ancient fairies might not be General Motors' business, but they take center stage in GM's innovative campaign to promote alternative renewable fuels.

"Who is Benjamin Stove?," a three-month-long Alternate Reality Game (ARG), has encouraged more than 280,000 participants to learn more about GM's commitment to promoting renewable fuel options in the U.S. and the wide availability of FlexFuel vehicles among GM's vehicle lineup.

Developed with the Campbell-Ewald advertising and marketing communications agency and innovative experimental media firm GMD Studios, the game launched on January 9 with a dedicated "Who Is Benjamin Stove?" Web site (<http://www.whoisbenjaminstove.com>) and a plea from Tampa resident Tucker Darby to the online community to help him unravel the mystery behind an

unusual painting of crop circles he acquired as a child.

The story has developed over the course of 12 weeks through ongoing online and real-world communications with gamers, including additional Web sites, online puzzles, e-mails, print stories and online

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ads. In addition, real- world clues planted in several markets, including Seattle, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York City, Phoenix, Miami, Salt Lake City, Atlanta and Columbus (Ohio) provided the opportunity to actively engage participants and extend the game beyond the confines of cyberspace.

"The 'Who Is Benjamin Stove?' game was developed to build awareness of GM's renewable fuel initiatives and programs, including our 'Live Green, Go Yellow' campaign," said Bob Kraut, director, GM Brand Marketing and Advertising Operations. "GM already has on the road more than 1.5 million vehicles with FlexFuel technology capable of running on either gasoline or E85 ethanol fuel. We continue to be an industry leader in promoting E85 awareness and use."

"The 'Who is Benjamin Stove?' campaign is an innovative strategy to interact with a large and engaged online community while creating buzz about all that GM is doing for this timely issue of alternate fuel sources and our dependence on foreign oil," said Ed Dilworth, executive vice president, chief Contact officer at Campbell-Ewald. "Immersive entertainment is an increasingly important trend for marketers and the response to 'Who Is Benjamin Stove?' has been phenomenal. It has far exceeded the buzz we hoped to create."

"Who Is Benjamin Stove?" has generated broad appeal among ARG aficionados and has been praised on message boards for addressing the key components for a successful ARG by appealing to a broad cross section of gamers; including players of all skill levels; developing sub-storylines among multiple genres; utilizing strong pacing and regular updates; creating a quality user experience; and challenging participants through multiple types of play. The game will come to its conclusion in early April with additional online and real world opportunities to engage players.

#### About GM

General Motors Corp. (NYSE: GM), the world's largest automaker, has been the global industry sales leader for 75 years. Founded in 1908, GM today employs about 327,000 people around the world. With global headquarters in Detroit, GM manufactures its cars and trucks in 33 countries. In 2005, 9.17 million GM cars and trucks were sold globally under the following brands: Buick, Cadillac, Chevrolet, GMC, GM Daewoo, Holden, HUMMER, Opel, Pontiac, Saab, Saturn and Vauxhall. More information on GM can be found at <http://www.gm.com> .

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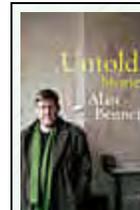
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# Advertising Age®

## GM's Alternate Reality Game Yields Real-World Results

**Carmaker's Offbeat Online Effort Hypes Ethanol Campaign, Logs 1.8 Million Page Views**

By [Jean Halliday](#)

*Published:* July 10, 2006

DETROIT (AdAge.com) -- For four months, Christopher Love was plagued by a nagging question: Who is Benjamin Stove?

Mr. Love, a 26-year-old from Albuquerque, N.M., was caught up in the mystery with thousands of others across the world, spending between 15 minutes and four hours every day trying to solve it. But what he and his fellow detectives didn't realize was they were really involved in an intricate commercial, part of General Motors Corp.'s "Live Green, Go Yellow" ethanol-ad blitz.

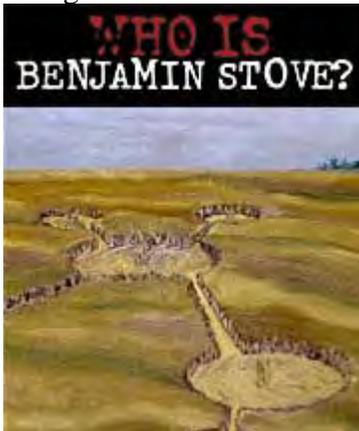
"Who knew a four-month commercial could be so fun?" Mr. Love told Advertising Age in an e-mail. For GM, the feeling is mutual. The automaker's first trip into the world of alternate-reality gaming nabbed the company a small but highly engaged audience for what ordinarily might have been a mundane message: the benefits of ethanol. More than 1,000 players came along for the four-month romp through "a modern-day mystery," said GM's Bob Kraut, director-brand marketing and advertising operations.

The mystery-solving gambit, dubbed "Who is Benjamin Stove?" kept the auto giant's role as backer concealed until late in the process. The goal: Create prelaunch buzz for the ethanol-ad blitz.

Alternate-reality games, or ARGs, are catching on with marketers. ARGs ask players to solve mysteries by seeking out clues online and, increasingly, offline as well. Microsoft used an ARG in 2004 to market Halo 2, Audi launched its "Art of the Heist" game last year, and ABC is using an ARG to keep "Lost" viewers intrigued throughout the summer.

GM's effort attracted 1.8 million page views through mid-April, with 383,829 consumers spending an average of nearly 17 minutes per visit, according to Stefan Kogler, senior VP-creative director of new media at Campbell-Ewald, which designed the game. (To put that into perspective, a niche cable

network such as the Travel Channel might snag about 400,000 prime-time viewers on an average night.) GMD Studios—the Winter Park, Fla., outfit that created Audi's "Art of the Heist" game -- executed the GM game.



It launched in early January at [whoisbenjaminstove.com](http://whoisbenjaminstove.com). There, fictional 29-year-old Tampa, Fla., resident and Newton, Iowa, native Tucker Darby asked for help unraveling the mystery of an antique painting of crop circles he bought in the sale of the Stove family's farm estate in Newton. Benjamin Stove, the farm's last owner, had disappeared without a trace. (Tucker Darby's online picture is actually the ad agency's Brad Fairhurst; other Campbell-Ewald execs appear as well: Christine Wilson posed as Sarah Randall, cynical publisher of [debunkette.com](http://debunkette.com), a website on the paranormal and Chris Zientek was Benjamin Stove, who spent his life trying to solve the crop-circles mystery.)

The story unfolded over 12 weeks, with twists and turns including alien appearances and conspiracy theories. One discovery: The crop-circle painting and other clues nearly matched ethanol's molecular makeup.

Gamers called officials in Newton to try to track down both Tucker Darby and Benjamin Stove. They created their own set of rules and established a complaints department. A university newspaper in Finland actually sought to interview Mr. Darby, Mr. Kogler said.

Players also tracked clues leading to real-world destinations, such as libraries in eight cities, where the game's puppet masters had left hints in rare books from the 1950s. A man in a black trench coat offered additional information at a bar in Manhattan.

In late April, [USAToday.com](http://USAToday.com) carried an open letter from Mr. Stove, citing GM for leading the charge against the fossil-fuel crisis with its "Live Green, Go Yellow" campaign and flexible-fuel engines.

Mr. Love, who owns a Mazda Protégé and diesel Dodge Ram 3500, said he "didn't really have any opinion at all about GM before" but now has a favorable, if not yet strong, impression of the carmaker. "It's nice to know that a large corporation will take the time and spend the money to spread awareness of a noble cause."

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